

Family Group Conferencing

Policy:

Darlington expects that discussions with family regarding a Family Group Conference should commence at the earliest opportunity beginning at the Front Door and be regularly revisited through the involvement of Children Services where appropriate.

Family Group Conferencing will be used in Darlington to assist families in developing plans in the following circumstances:-

- **Prevention** – family members provide support to the parents, children and young people to enable them to reside safely in their birth parents' care. This includes children subject to child protection plans / child in need plans.
- **Rehabilitation** – family members provide support to the parents, children and young people to enable them to safely return to their birth parents' care.
- **Kinship Care** – the family are asked to identify a relative or significant other (e.g. family friend) to take on the care of a child or young person for a short period of time.
- **Permanent Care Arrangements** – the family are asked to identify a relative or significant other to take on the care of a child or young person permanently. If this is not possible, the family are centrally involved in planning for the child's permanent placement outside of the family i.e. Adoption.
- **Stabilise Placement** – families are involved in conferences with carers to develop plans around how to best support the child / young person's placement outside the family.

The Early help Teams also have trained Family Group facilitators and consideration should be given to the use of this facility when Early help (case not open to Social Care) are working with a family and discussions within the team can be held to and facilitated within that service without discussion with the Family Group Conference Team.

1. What is a Family Group Conference?

A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a decision-making meeting in which a child's wider family network come together to make a plan about the future arrangements for the child. The plan will ensure that (s) he is safe and his/her wellbeing is promoted. Family Group Conferences are not an emergency response tool and should be considered on every case when with agreement with the family it is felt appropriate to hold one.

FGCs are intended as a respectful and empowering process in which parents, children and members of the wider family are given clear information about the agency's concerns and are asked to produce a plan that addresses those concerns and answers specific questions.

The focus of the FGC is the child/ young person and promotes a 'no blame' ethos, to assist families to look at the current situation and make a plan to move forward, building on the resilience and strengths within the family

The person requesting the service must be able to articulate in agreement with the family what the expectations are of the FGC and what is the minimum expectations to support and promote the family resilience. They should also articulate to the family any next steps that may be undertaken by the Local Authority if working alongside the family does not provide an appropriate level of safety to the child(ren).

The family map should be discussed with the allocated worker and any changes or suggestions should be agreed with the family with full explanations given as to why they are required to ensure the plan is clear and supports the family.

Should the families require a timelier response, consideration will be given to hold a Family Network Meeting (FNM). An FNM is a rapid response to supporting children and their families in crises to include a smaller number of family members. Social Workers from outside of the Family Group Conference Team can hold these meetings with Support from the FGC Advanced Practitioner.

Where a Social Worker is requesting a child (ren) to be accommodated in an emergency, a Family Network meeting can be held within 72 hours.

The optimal time for conducting an FGC is 4-6 weeks from the time that the coordinator is allocated, although if the family network is sizeable, there are relatives abroad or some work is required to encourage family members to engage with the co-coordinator, they can take a little longer.

2. Requesting a Family Group Conference on behalf of a family

A request for a Family Group Conference can be made by any child (rens) social worker and will require:

Someone with **Parental Responsibility** (PR) agreeing to the request and to the sharing of information. Parental responsibility could be held by the birth parents or the local authority (under a court order). The views of a Gillick competent child will need to be considered

If the local authority has PR (under a court order) and the wider family object to go ahead with an FGC, the local authority can consent to the FGC in spite of the parents' opposition, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. If an FGC is undertaken without the consent of the parent then this should be revisited regularly through the process to ensure the parent has full knowledge of the actions and outcomes. However, this should be a last resort as it is always preferable to work in partnership with those with PR.

The person making the request on behalf of the family should have early discussions with the family on their support networks. (This may include relatives, significant family, friends or community members). However, when making the request it may not be obvious and this should not prevent a request being made;

- The request should outline the concerns from both the parent and the worker views **and any issues that may prevent the family from partaking in the FGC.**

Request for a FGC can come from either Keeping Families Together Team, Children's Front Door, Assessing and Safeguarding, Children with disabilities and Looked After Through Care Social Workers for children who are already part of a social worker's caseload. The Front Door may also identify families that would benefit from a referral via the Early Help Team these should be referred to Early Help Teams for allocation to trained FGC staff within the service.

Situations where a request for an FGC should be considered include the following:

- Children in need of receiving safeguarding support
- Children who are at risk of coming into care
- Children who have been taken into care on an emergency basis
- Children for whom Public Law Outline processes have commenced
- Creation of a safe plan to avoid the need for a Child Protection Plan

- Following a Child Protection Conference to include wider family in the plan
- Where there is a request for accommodation or respite care
- Where there is a negative outcome following a pre-birth assessment
- Where there is an application for the discharge of a Care Order to return a child home
- For all cases it is expected that Families will be assessed as being likely to understand and engage with family group conference procure and methods
- The child(ren) case file(s) should clearly articulate and document the discussion regarding an FGC and note the reasons for or against undertaking an FGC, this decision should be reconsidered regularly through the involvement of Children Social Care

Priority will be given when the following circumstances apply:

- when consideration is being given to care proceedings and the child or young person is on the edge of care.
- A child or young person has been accommodated or a placement is requested
- The child or young person is subject to a child protection plan

A request would be considered inappropriate to proceed under the following circumstances

- Isolated asylum-seeking children
- Where families have refused consent to share information
- Where there are current criminal or Section 47 investigations
- Where there is high risk of violence at the conference

However, a discussion should be held with the FGC service and reasons for not proceeding should be clearly noted on the case file and revisited if appropriate should circumstances change

A request for an FGC does not mean that an FGC will take place if it is agreed that it would not be appropriate following discussion between the person making the request and the FGC Advanced Practitioner. Reasons should be clearly recorded on the Child(ren) files.

A request cannot proceed if the family refused consent to share information that is relevant to safeguard the child/ren /young person.

3. How to make a request

A request should be made via telephone to the Advanced Practitioner in the FGC service at the earliest opportunity the requesting social worker must have sufficient information to have a meaningful conversation including the names of the children and family basic history, current status and any issues of safety

The Advanced Practitioner will clarify the referral objective by:

- Obtaining relevant child and family information
- Confirming the concerns and issues in the form of questions for the family to address at the FGC
- Identify strengths within the family for the family to build on
- Confirm the bottom-line for the FGC. (Bottom-lines can be defined as the non-negotiable position of the Local Authority. For example, if the child cannot live with a particular person, this should be stated. The bottom line will also state what will happen should the family be unable to make a safe plan for the child or young person.)
- Confirm the resources and services available to the family.

The FGC Co-ordinator will then prepare discussion notes and a draft report. the notes and draft report will be checked by the FGC manager and emailed to the person making the request within 3 working days.

The referrer is to check and amend the draft report if necessary, to ensure the details are accurate. Once happy with the report, the referrer will then share the report with the parents/carers and gain consent for the report to be shared with those who will be attending the FGC. In some circumstances, the FGC team are able to help obtain consent to prevent delay in the process.

It may be possible for a meeting to be co-ordinated more quickly where the family, information-givers are readily available, and the FGC service is able to accept and allocate the referral immediately. Sufficient time also needs to be allowed for the co-ordinator to contact all the family members and assist them in preparing for the meeting.

4. The role of the Family Group Conference Coordinator

FGC services will always be co-ordinated independently from the service or team which has concerns about the child's safety and wellbeing. The Co-ordinator is neutral i.e. that they have no case holding, statutory or decision-making responsibilities in relation to the child. The co-ordinator should not have had any previous involvement with the family or represent the views of any agency working with the family **nor would they attend other meetings connected with the child so as not to compromise their independence.**

The role of the independent co-ordinator is vital in negotiating attendance at a FGC and in informing all participants about the process involved. This role is separate to that of the social worker.

The co-ordinator discusses with the child/young person how they may be helped to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate in the meeting. The child/ young person must be supported to participate fully within the process and it is the co-ordinator's role to find flexible and imaginative ways of achieving this. If the child /young person requires an advocate, then the co-ordinator will match them with an independent advocate, and they will contact the family direct. The advocate will engage with the child (ren) concerned and ensure their views are known to the co-ordinator and during the FGC.

5. Preparation

The co-ordinator, in conjunction with the child/young person and those with parental responsibility, identify who is in the family network for the child and should be invited to the meeting.

This can include anyone who is the child/family's support network, e.g. relatives, friends and neighbours. The decision to exclude a person will be exercised rarely and only after strategies to avoid exclusion has been considered and discussed by the FGC Manager/Co-ordinator and referrer. Reasons to exclude a person may include: A person who has been deemed to pose a risk to children and anyone who has threatened emotional or physical harm to the child or a family member attending, where safe to do so a shuttle conference should be considered.

With permission from the parent/carer, the co-ordinator will meet separately with the child/young person to find out their wishes and feelings about the situation and possible solutions. They will also discuss how the child may be enabled to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate in the meeting.

If the child would like an advocate, that person will normally meet with the child to prepare them for the meeting and to assist in presenting their views.

The co-ordinator also meets with all members of the family network to:

- explain the FGC process
- the reasons for the meeting
- the role of other participants at the FGC
- to discuss any worries or concerns they have about the meeting and listen to their views

If the case is in court proceedings, the co-ordinator will also need to inform the family that their plan will be shared by the local authority with the Children's Guardian and other parties within the court arena. The social worker should inform the Guardian that they are making a referral to the FGC service. The FGC coordinator will contact the Children's Guardian so that they are aware that the FGC is taking place and has accurate information about the purpose of the FGC. Guardians are not automatically invited to the FGC since the invitation list is decided by the family.

Whilst working closely with the family, the co-ordinator also liaises with the person making the request and other relevant agencies and invite them to the FGC as appropriate. This is to ensure that family members have clear and information about the child welfare and/or protection issues which need to be considered at the FGC, including the bottom line. The FGC cannot go ahead without the person who made the initial request being present.

The co-ordinator negotiates the date, time and a neutral venue for the conference, sends out invitations and makes the necessary practical arrangements including refreshments.

Where the family's first language is not English, the coordinator will need to ascertain whether they wish to have an interpreter available to assist them with the part of the meeting in which professionals are involved (i.e. information giving and consideration of the plan). Private time can be conducted in their own language.

Coordinators keep minimal case notes. All information the co-coordinator gathers in the preparation of the FGC remains confidential unless it is new child protection information that poses a risk of harm to the child, whereupon the co-ordinator will follow Darlington Borough Council Child Protection procedures. Co-ordinators generally do not attend other decision-making meetings connected with the child as this may compromise their independence.

6. How does a Family Group Conference Plan Integrate with Child Protection Planning?

Where a Child Protection Plan is in place or is being considered, it is essential to discuss how the FGC plan will contribute to keeping the child safe and reduce the risks that have been identified in the Child Protection Plan.

The Family Plan drawn up at the FGC must be sent to the Safeguarding **IRO** so it can be included in the review of the child protection plan.

The FGC does not remove or replace the need for Child Protection Conferences.

Where the FGC process uncovers new information that of the child is suffering or likely to suffer **Significant Harm** the co-ordinator must inform the child's social worker immediately.

7. When the conference is held it has three key elements:

Stage 1: Information Sharing

This part of the meeting is facilitated by the co-ordinator who makes sure that everyone is introduced, that everyone present understands the purpose and process of the FGC and agrees how the meeting will be conducted, including if considered helpful by those present, explicit ground rules.

Professionals will not need to provide a written report but will be expected to provide a verbal contribution detailing the strengths of the family, issues of concern, services available and the "bottom line". Agencies must also be prepared to respond to any queries that the conference members may have (This could include questions from family members and advocates).

The type of information that is helpful to present to the family includes the following:

- Current concerns and the reason for the conference rather than a detailed history;
- Experience of the family's strengths and successes as well as concerns;
- Clarity about what needs to change for the child and within what timescales;
- Information about what resources could be available to support the family plan, any limitations on resources (including resources of time), timescales for accessing resources and any procedures that need to be followed to obtain resources;
- Any child welfare concerns that will affect what can be agreed in the plan such as the child not having contact with a person or a schedule one offender;
- What action will be taken if the family cannot make a plan or the plan is not agreed, or agency concerns are not addressed in the plan. This could vary from 'remaining concerned' to evoking statutory powers such as an application for a care order.

The presentation of information is important, the FGC is not a Child Protection Conference and it is helpful that the information that is presented in a clear and concise manner and should exclude professional jargon.

General issues include:

- Information must be up to date but not new, there should be no 'surprises' for the family members with whom agencies have been working;
- Statements should be specific such as "Jack has been absent from school for 13 sessions in the last term" not "Jack has missed school a lot";
- Give explanations of any professional terms;
- Keep explanations of concerns centred on the needs of the child rather than on what it is felt the adults should do;
- Focus on the problem rather than anticipating solutions, for example, "How can the family ensure that Darren is taken to school every day" rather than "Mum needs to get Darren to school more often";
- Questions are not intended to be assessment related, but rather focussing on a plan that the family can create in response concerns.

Stage 2: Private Family Time

The co-ordinator and professionals withdraw from the meeting after the information sharing stage and professionals, apart from the person who made the request, can leave the meeting at this point. It is important the family are able to meet for as long as they wish to formulate their family plan in private. The family members must have time and privacy to talk among themselves and come up with a plan that addresses the concerns raised in the information giving part of the conference, identifying resources and support which are required from agencies, as well as within the family to make it work.

Occasionally an advocate for a child will remain present for some of private family time, depending on the wishes of the child and the family. Otherwise the advocate will be available to the child outside of the private time to assist them in communicating their views to the meeting.

The co-ordinator will join the family for private planning time only if the family ask for them to be present, otherwise the family are left on their own to discuss and plan. If an advocate is present the child/young person will decide whether or not they want their advocate to remain during private family time.

The family then produce their plan. The co-ordinator can assist with this if the family asks but the plan should be written by the family in their own words. If the co-ordinator is asked to write the plan, they must write it using the family's own words.

The social worker and the co-ordinator meet with the family to discuss and agree the plan and consider any resources needed. The person making the request may need to consult with a manager before accepting the plan, but it is hoped that any discussions will have taken place prior to the FGC.

The family plan should be accepted by the requesting team unless the issue of the child's safety and well-being has not been satisfactorily addressed and the child is deemed to be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.

The facilitator will send an electronic copy of the plan to the referrer for approval within 24 hours of the FGC. The referrer will have 2 working days from receipt of the plan to approve, should the referrer not respond within 2 working days, it will be assumed the plan is accepted and shared with family / friends and any professional identified within the plan.

Any reasons for not accepting the plan must be made clear immediately and the family should be given the opportunity to respond to the concerns and change or add to the plan if necessary. If the plan is not accepted this should be clearly articulated to the family and any questions answered, this should also be clearly recorded on the child(ren)file with reasons for non-acceptance.

It is important to ensure that any child/young person present has a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views are understood.

Where court proceedings are in progress, the person making the request will need to make it clear to the family that their agreement to the plans will ultimately be subject to the decision of the court.

Stage 3 Validation/presentation of the Plan

The family's plan will be presented to the person making the request at the end of the conference. It is expected that the person making the request will remain at the FGC until the family have made their plan. Discussion will take place between the co-ordinator and person making the request and other agencies that may have been requested by the family to provide services. If the person making the request is not present at the end of the conference the family will be contacted by the social worker within one working day of the conference to be advised about the professional view of the family plan.

Stage 4 Distribution of the plan

The co-ordinator types the family plan, unless the family want to do this themselves and distributes the plan to all relevant agencies and the family within three days of the conference. There are no formal minutes of the FGC this needs to be recorded on the Child's electronic file under the Liquid Logic Episode(see Liquid Logic operating procedures for further guidance).

9. Implementation of the Plan

All those concerned need to implement their parts of the plan within agreed timescales and communicate and address any concerns which arise. The family will be asked to nominate a family member/friend, or ideally two people, who will take responsibility for informing the person who made the request if the plan is not working and/or needs adjustments. This could be the FGC facilitator.

10. Review of the Plan

A review date for the FGC will be agreed at the conference and is usually planned to be held no later than six weeks after the initial FGC. The review will be convened by the co-ordinator and the requesting agency will be expected to attend. The date and time for this will be written into the family plan.

The review enables the family and the requester to check out if the plan is working and to adjust the levels of support or resources necessary.

All families will be offered a review, but it is the family's decision as to whether a formal review takes place. Families may choose to review the plan themselves informally and will update workers on progress.

The review is arranged on the same principles as the original meeting, i.e. with private family time. It will be the responsibility of the referrer to update the family group of the current situation in relation to the child/young person or any significant changes which have occurred since the initial meeting.

Any changes to the family plan arising from the Review FGC will be agreed and circulated in the same way as the initial plan.

No more than 2 reviews of the plan are recommended to limit dependency for families, the co-ordinator will encourage the families to monitor the plan themselves

11. Ending of Involvement

The FGC service involvement will end once the initial and review FGC's have taken place.

Involvement will also end if:

- The referral has been assessed as inappropriate;
- The family withdrew or did not provide consent for the FGC to proceed;
- A decision was made that it was inappropriate to proceed i.e. if safety issues were too great., this should clearly be recorded on the child's electronic file.
- The outcome must be recorded on the electronic file using one of the listed outcomes which best reflects the reason for ending the involvement

12. Recording and Information Sharing

12.1 The FGC service's primary function is to facilitate the Family Group Conference and Family Network Meeting and any recording will relate solely to the conference. A paper file will be held until the end of the FGC coordinators involvement. A detailed record will only be made when information is given which relates to concerns for a child's or other person's safety. These records will be forwarded to the relevant social work team.

12.2 The person who requested the service will be responsible for recording their involvement with the FGC and the outcome of the conference (Social Workers will be expected to record information on Liquid Logic). It is the referrer's responsibility to share all key documentation including relevant sections of the plan with guardians and the court.